The Peopling of East Asia: Putting Together Archaeology, Linguistics and Genetics.


This book, based on a workshop held in France in 2001, was edited by three researchers who specialize in archaeology, linguistics, and genetics and has three parts dealing with archaeological, linguistic, and physical anthropology. The title of the book includes only East Asia, but Southeast Asia and the Pacific are also covered in some chapters. In contrast, Japan and Korea, which constitute an important part of East Asia, are mentioned mostly in part III, and archaeological and linguistic studies of these nations are not well covered. I understand that the origin of the Japanese and Korean languages is not well known. Yet, as a Japanese researcher, I have some reservation to accept the title as it is. A more appropriate title should have been considered.

Peter Bellwood tries to combine archaeological and linguistic data in Chapter 1. He presents his view on the homelands of East and Southeast Asian language families in the figure on p. 26, based on the ‘farming/language dispersal hypothesis’ originally proposed by Renfrew (1987), who studied the spread of farming in Europe. I remember my question to Professor Renfrew when he gave a seminar at the International Institute for Advanced Studies at Keihanna, southern Kyoto in 1993 (Brenner and Hanihara, 1995). I asked him if he could generalize his hypothesis to other areas such as East Asia and Meso-America. He replied ‘No’ at that time. Although people in the Korean peninsula and Japanese archipelago introduced rice farming, they never converted their languages to Chinese or other languages in current-day China or Southeast Asia. I think this is a good counter example to the farming/language dispersal hypothesis advocated by Bellwood in this chapter. In any case, Bellwood does not discuss the situation in the Japanese archipelago here.

Roger Blench briefly mentions Old Japanese words related to rice agriculture in Chapter 2. He concludes that most of those words seem to have no external cognates at all. How can the ‘farming/language dispersal hypothesis’ explain this isolated situation of Japanese, a language that is spoken by people whose cultural background is closely tied with rice agriculture?

The late Stanley Starosta, who was a co-organizer of the workshop on which this book was based, contributed Chapter 11. He succinctly summarizes one scenario of language diversification in East Asia, though the Japanese, Korean, Ainu, and Altaic languages are omitted. It is slightly strange for me that Starosta and other linguists in this book never refer to the Dene-Caucasian hypothesis (e.g. Ruhlen, 1994).

I wonder whether the kind of very scattered geographical distribution of one group of languages proposed in the Dene-Caucasian hypothesis may look absurd to some linguists.

There are five chapters in Part III of this book referring to genetic data, such as HLA, GM, Rh blood groups, and Y chromosomes. To my surprise, mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) polymorphism was not covered. In contrast, mtDNA data were amply discussed in Bellwood and Renfrew (2002).

Indigenous people in Taiwan are discussed in Chapter 13, but mainly HLA data are presented. In 1990 and 1991, a Taiwanese and Japanese joint group, led by the late Satoshi Horai, conducted field study on indigenous people in Taiwan, and published a series of papers including mtDNA (Tajima et al., 2003), red blood cell enzymes (Jin et al., 1999), and serum proteins (Yuasa et al., 2001). Unfortunately none of those papers were mentioned in Chapter 13.

In conclusion, if one would like to write book on the peopling of ‘East Asia’, one should cover many more of the studies so far accumulated. Yet, the combination of archaeological, linguistic, and genetic data is not an easy task. In this sense, I appreciate the new synthesis attempted by the three editors of this book.

References


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